

THE FIGHT AGAINST MISREPRESENTATION: A
PRAGMATIST CRITIQUE OF THE AMERICAN
EDUCATION SYSTEM THROUGH THE OREGON TRAIL-
CD ROM

by

ALEXANDRA DENNEN

A THESIS

Presented to the Department of Philosophy
and the Robert D. Clark Honors College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts

June 2020

An Abstract of the Thesis of

Alexandra for the degree of Bachelor of Arts
in the Department of Philosophy to be taken June 2020

The Fight Against Misrepresentation: A pragmatist critique of the American education system through the Oregon Trail CD-ROM

Approved: Erin McKenna
Primary Thesis Advisor

This paper critiques how American education system—as it applies to history—fails to provide students with a proper representation of all perspectives of the past. An overview of *The Oregon Trail* CD-ROM highlights this lack, despite both being prominent in American classrooms for five decades and influencing millions of American children who are now citizens. It is those students who are now the government officials, teachers, and parents of a new generation. This generation continues to struggle with a divisive political climate that can be ameliorated through an education that provides all perspectives of each event in history. Using John Dewey’s pragmatism presented in his work *Democracy and Education* as a lens, we see that providing contentious perspectives of the past, encourages authentic and beneficial discourse on topics that allow individuals to see the present for what it is. The juxtaposition of differing points of view allows students, and therefore all citizens, to find commonality in humanity rather than division in the details. It is this education structure that emulates democracy.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my primary advisor, Dr. Erin McKenna not only for imparting her love for John Dewey and his positivity regarding education and democracy, but also for her guidance and patience throughout this whole process. I would also like to thank Paul Bodin, the third reader on my defense committee, for his Teaching Kids Philosophy class that ignited my interest in the role of philosophy in young students that inspired me to write on this topic. Lastly to Professor Casey Shoop, my Honors College advisor, for sharing his love of reading in the Honors College class that I look back on most fondly. Thanks to the Clark Honors College, as well, for pushing me to achieve this personal goal of writing my own work.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge the circumstances that made this possible. To my parents whose encouragement and support throughout my college experience allowed me to pursue higher education and who are inspirations to me in every way. I am indebted to their invaluable assistance; a luxury I know many do not have and something that I hope to help change. And, of course, to the Native American tribes whose lands were stolen and cultures erased at the hands of the white man. It is on those lands that American society exists, the University of Oregon was built, and that I was raised. It is paramount, now more than ever, to acknowledge the atrocities of the past that have allowed our present to be.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Purpose	1
Argument	3
The Oregon Trail	5
History	5
CD-ROM	11
What is “True” History?	20
Pragmatism	25
Democracy & Education	25
Current Relevance	33
Conclusion	38
Bibliography	43

Introduction

Purpose

Throughout my undergraduate learning, I had the pleasure of teaching complex philosophical matters to middle school students. Although my lesson plans were prepared to tackle complex topics such as metaphysics and their stance on what constitutes a being or its existence, we were able to approach these issues in palpable manner that was much more applicable to their lives. Together we questioned the potential circumstances where breaching honesty was more moral than telling the truth, we questioned conceptions of gender and the social norms and expectations associated with one's gender identity, we pondered what constitutes art, and we questioned what rights are innately ascribed to humans versus that of animals, amongst many other topics. It was clear that their teacher prioritized and appreciated the importance of an individual's ability to think philosophically enough to intentionally integrate it into their curriculum; a characteristic I valued greatly and continued to ruminate on even long after my time in her classroom.

Studying philosophy myself, I was excited to see its incorporation into the environment of young learners. An even greater satisfaction was knowing that these children were beginning to cultivate the lifelong skill of information analysis. Throughout my primary education, I was taught by being talked at rather than engaged with to seek out questions and solutions on my own. It was not until the end of high school that I began to critically analyze the information as it was being presented and even the concept of education in general. Although some areas of learning are more easily taught by presenting the information as factual, I believe a greater emphasis

should be placed upon individually and empirically analyzing new learnings. I discovered on my own that I must take into account the biases of the person presenting me with new information, coupled with their pre-existing opinions and how that influenced their comprehension of and relationship with that material. As I did this for all the information I gleaned from teachers and texts, I sought to understand things from a more objective lens. We all know of course that no one can truly obtain objectivity, but I came to believe that the best we can each do is intentionally seek out the multiple perspectives of any given issue or topic.

In writing this thesis, I sought to explore the phenomenon of the American public's struggle with understanding the bipartisan perspectives of our political climate. Because I have actively sought out the genuine standpoints of both political parties, it has been extremely dejecting to see the lack of compassion for the other side and positive belief in democracy. With the advent of social media and the Internet's omniscient access to information, it is phenomenal that there is so much confusion, misunderstanding, and anger. My studies have allowed me to engage with and critique virtually any topic on a conceptual basis and I believe that being able to analyze ideas and put them into conversation is a deeply imperative quality. Even more important would be critiquing the presentation of ostensible facts that are taken for granted and merely accepted rather than questioned. It is my contention that there is no greater good for the American people than to think deeply, critically, and individually. Furthermore, I believe that this mentality should be taught to all students.

Since our founding, the American presentation of our history has been rooted in affirming the principles and morals of our founding fathers. Although noble ideals,

there have been many instances where American history has failed to uphold these intentions equitably. This has been specifically evident in relation to the lack of humanity and dignity shown to the Native Americans who inhabited this land before the white, European settlers arrived. A critique of American education as lacking an intentional training on critical assessment is broad. I would like to argue that the flawed presentation of American national history has lacked accurate representation of Native perspectives and experiences in textbooks and therefore has improperly prepared students not only to critically assess history but also the implications for the present. To do this, I will examine the presentation of Native Americans in The Oregon Trail CD-ROM through the lens of John Dewey's pragmatism.

Argument

I dove into this topic with the broad goal of wanting to answer: How does the lack of critical judgment of American history in schools set us up for failure to assess the accuracy of current politics? More specifically, I was interested in the influence of fake news on a population that was never properly taught to question the story presented to them. How can Americans rally together in the name of democracy if we can't even see eye-to-eye? We see this all the time in history textbooks, ostensibly educational articles, and monist teachings of past events: learners simply accept the narrative provided to them especially if it's presented by a convincing source. To some extent learning is highly dependent upon trusting the information given by credible outlets, but the most important aspect of learning is the synthesis of knowledge after its presentation in conjunction with the critical analysis of where it fits in. Comprehension is dependent upon questioning the author's lens, biases, and intended audience. Throughout this

essay, I am going to dive into the importance of philosophical inquiry in the learning process and how our current educational system falls short in teaching individuals how to critically assess information presented to them because we focus our historical account predominantly on the white, male narrative.

The presentation of American history is centered around the experiences of the European immigrant who established this country as we know it today. This is predominately because it was these men who had the luxury of writing their history that allowed their perspectives and opinions to reign supreme. Pragmatism encourages critical reflection and therefore presents a critique of this flawed generational storytelling, because it encourages the inclusion of the experiences of those who have been traditionally excluded from American history. Pragmatism not only encourages but also depends upon bringing together manifold perspectives in order to gain a more comprehensive picture and understanding of past dynamics. Before diving into pragmatism, let's first take a look at the history of the Oregon Trail and the significance of the CD-ROM.

The Oregon Trail

History

The history of the Oregon Trail cannot be understood in its entirety without first familiarizing oneself with the past relations between the European settlers that came to the Americas and the Native Americans that had lived on these lands for millennia before the Western world even had knowledge of its existence. Upon their arrival, the white man decimated not only the individuals, but also the culture of each tribe that had previously thrived on these lands. To set the scene for The Oregon Trail, we must first understand the social relations between the Native Americans and the European settlers who went on to become US citizens. For this section of history, we will rely heavily on Howard Zinn's "A People's History of the United States" as he intentionally seeks the perspective of the oppressed to shed light on the telling of a more robust story.

Zinn begins his book by explicating the "primitive accumulation of capital"¹ of the Spaniards in their selfish, animalistic desire to acquire gold and slaves in return for a sliver of pride from their home country. In order to achieve this goal, they capitalized on the innate charity of the Arawaks for social and monetary gain. In just over 10 years after their arrival, the population on Hispaniola decreased by about 3 million due to Natives dying from war, slavery, and gold mines.² Unfortunately, the grotesque destruction of these Native communities by the Europeans both physically and spiritually, did not end there. Once word got out that the Americas had gold, land, and slaves, white men began to arrive on the Eastern coast of the Americas by the boat load

¹ Zinn, Howard. "A People's History of the United States." *Harper Collins*. 2003, 12.

² Zinn, 7.

from sixteenth to eighteenth century.³

Coming from a history where brute force reined supreme, where capitalism and socio-economic hierarchy were deeply engrained into their culture, European settlers were baffled by the sense of community Native Americans shared. Zinn writes, In the villages of the Iroquois, land was owned in common and worked in common.

Hunting was done together, and the catch was divided among the members of the village. Houses were considered common property and were shared by several families. The concept of private ownership of land and homes was foreign to the Iroquois. A French Jesuit priest who encountered them in the 1650s wrote: 'No poorhouses are needed among them, because they are neither mendicants or paupers... Their kindness, humanity and courtesy not only makes them liberal with what they have, but causes them to possess hardly anything except in common.'⁴

It is this beautiful sense of community—a trait unique to Native Americans from the perspective of Western emigrants—that was utterly exploited and destroyed. Rather than value their willingness for cooperation, these white settlers instead imposed their cultural norms on both these people and land that were foreign to them.

The European's first few winters rattled their communities, as they weren't adequately prepared for the climate on the Northeast coast of the United States. Without the benevolence of the local Natives, they may not have weathered the storm. But once they had the ground beneath their feet, these white settlers had their sights set on making this land their home—and their's only. Over the course of this tumultuous period where the Native Americans and white settlers negotiated relations, land grabs led to the gradual dominance and ownership of these "American" lands by these new

³ Ellis, Elisabeth G. and Anthony Elser. "World History." *Pearson Education, Inc.* 2009, 482-483.

⁴ Zinn, 20.

settlers.

It is clear, as previously stated, that the Native Americans had a much different perception of ownership than the white settlers. European laws that governed property were foreign to Native American tribes who tried to peacefully cohabitate with their new neighbors. Be it for peace or security, these Native Americans nevertheless signed treaties with US politicians that slowly forced these tribes to live on smaller and smaller plots of land. To better understand this process, we must look to the political moves of Andrew Jackson. After diving into a more authentic and robust historical account of this time period, instead of “the frontiersman, soldier, democrat, man of the people” that you find in high school and elementary school American history textbooks, you will instead find “Jackson the slaveholder, land speculator, executioner of dissident soldiers, exterminator of Indians.”⁵

It seemed to be Jackson’s political imperative to rid these newly claimed American lands of its previous settlers to make room for the cultural and physical expansion of the American people; these European transplants who came to the Americas to create new lives for themselves. Rather than be so blatant as to enact war against these Natives, he established a more subtle method: slowly push them further back and wear down their resolve to maintain ownership of their lands. This caused a cycle throughout the beginning of the nineteenth century where Native tribes were promised sovereignty and land “forever,” “for all time,” “as long as the grass grows or water runs”⁶ only for it to be negotiated away from them once more to make room for the whites to move into and settle that area.

⁵ Zinn, 130.

⁶ Zinn, 134.

When ... the size of the nation [was doubled] by purchasing the Louisiana Territory from France in 1803—thus extending the western frontier from the Appalachians across the Mississippi to the Rocky Mountains—he thought the Indians could move there. He proposed to Congress that Indians should be encouraged to settle down on smaller tracts to do farming; also, they should be encouraged to trade with whites, to incur debts, and then to pay off these debts with tracts of land... Indian removal was necessary for the opening of the vast American lands to agriculture, to commerce, to markets, to money, to the development of the modern capitalist economy.⁷

There was an intentional breakdown of communal landholding, forcing Native Americans to own land individually, a concept with which they were deeply unfamiliar. This enforced further social separation of the Natives not only from the whites, but also themselves. Between tribes as well as American citizens, there was bribing, competing for the best deal, and backstabbing. Jefferson's idea of "how to handle the Indians, by bringing them into 'civilization.'"⁸

Now that we have a better understanding of the tumultuous past relations between the white settlers and Native peoples, we can now overview the historical significance of the Oregon Trail from the perspective of the traditional US history books in conjunction with that of the less commonly viewed—but equally important—Native American lens.

There is some contention about what specifically ignited the American expansion westward, but from about 1812 to 1842, fur traders and evangelicals were predominantly the only people traveling west.⁹ By the 1840s, Americans in the East

⁷ Zinn, 126.

⁸ Zinn, 128.

⁹ Mumper, Lucile S. "The Oregon Trail." *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society*. vol. 28, no. 1. 1950, 23-25.

were eager to expand their horizons under the influence of manifest destiny.¹⁰ Believing it was their divine right to claim the westward lands, American pioneers emigrated West with a variety of reasons: to spread Christianity, to practice Mormonism freely, to make money in trade or the gold rush, or to live out the dream of adventure or starting anew.

At its peak, hundreds of thousands of pioneers were traveling across the well-worn Oregon Trail in a given season which ran from about April to October, taking between five and six months to make the trek by wagon. The 2,000-mile trip was grueling and the trail became littered with unnecessary items left behind on the journey as well as the bodies of those lost along the way by disease, exposure to the elements, or altercations. One in ten of those who embarked on this journey didn't make it to Oregon Country.¹¹ Thomas Jefferson encouraged citizens to settle these lands in Oregon as a means to establish an American presence in this area between Mexico—which at the time included much of California—and Canada, which was owned by the French at the time.

With the enactment of the Homestead Act of 1862, American citizens were encouraged to settle on government, or otherwise public land, in order to domesticate and cultivate it. This continued to encourage the westward movement and American settlement of the western coast. It wasn't until the transcontinental railway was built that the many months spent traveling by wagon was shortened to about a week via train.¹² Although this was the end of the Oregon Trail in the traditional sense to which it is commonly referred, westward expansion had become deeply ingrained into the

¹⁰ "Oregon Trail." *History.com*. 2019.

¹¹ *Ibid*

¹² Mumper, 32.

culture of the American people. It was vital in the American mission to settle and dominate what is now the continental US.

With that being the brief overview of the Oregon Trail from the perspective of the pioneer, we will now look at these events from the opposite perspective: the Native American tribes whose lands were invaded and ransacked. Although there are undoubtedly multifarious, unwritten moments of individual atrocities and mourning of the lands, culture, and history that once was, the Native perspective of the Oregon Trail was one filled with fear, anger, and frustration of these unknown people and unprecedented changes. What first started as uncommon sightings quickly turned into massive groups of white travelers who were not only unfamiliar with but also disrupted the harmonious balance of these lands.

After years of their lands being invaded and their livelihood completely disregarded, the Pawnee instated a twenty-five cent toll at a bridge across Shell Creek near the North Platte River which caused Dr. Thomas Wolfe in 1852 to refer to the Pawnee as “hateful wretches.”¹³ This is particularly interesting because this tribe was simply following the same capitalist practices that were seen and continue to be seen throughout American culture. Those that owned land can profit off of it. Although paying for supplies or purchasing property was completely rational at trading posts, when a payment must be made to or a minority group makes an inconvenience, it was notably frustrating.

One of the saddest changes that occurred to the ecological balances along the trail was the decimation of the buffalo population. Native American tribes’ accounts state

¹³ Bigelow, Bill. “On the Road to Cultural Bias: Critique of The Oregon Trail CD-ROM.”

National Council of Teachers of English. vol. 74, no. 2. 1997, 89.

that buffalo were once as numerous as the stars. As more white travelers began to traverse the planes of the mid-West, pioneers either for food or for fun hunted buffalo. Because these populations were so vastly numbered, no single traveler saw the consequences of their actions, but after many years of this, the Sioux—a tribe who had hunted these buffalo for generations—began to struggle to find and follow the herds that once roamed wide and free. It was because of the pioneers of the Oregon Trail that the Sioux eventually had to submit to the white man and partake in American society, as they were no longer able to hunt and exist in the same manner as their people had historically and culturally.

Above presents the two, contrasting perspectives on the causes and effects of the movement of Americans via the Oregon Trail. There is one story of manifest destiny, of expansion, growth, and prosperity. There is another, less common story, of a tribe's slow death both physically and spiritually. With these two perspectives in contention, one has a better understanding of the nuances of this part of American history. With this knowledge, one can begin to apply this to current dynamics between Natives and the American government. The Oregon Trail is just one of many aspects that has lead to the United State's present, and has also played a huge role in the education of multiple generations of American students. After getting a general grasp of what happened in and out of the history books, let's look to see how this was portrayed to millions of students in the wild success of *The Oregon Trail* CD-ROM.

CD-ROM

“The critics agree: *The Oregon Trail* (1993) is one of the greatest educational computer games ever produced.”¹⁴ With the advent of the Internet and the increasing

¹⁴ Bigelow, 84.

pervasiveness of computers in classrooms, the doors opened for a whole new way of making learning more approachable for students. Of all the successful educational computer games, none was as widespread and well known as *The Oregon Trail*. It has many accolades—like being the only game created for an educational purpose in the Video Game Hall of Fame as of 2016, for example—but no award or accomplishment is more important than the estimated 65 million copies¹⁵ of the game sold since its creation in the early 1970s.

The Oregon Trail CD-ROM was created by Bill Heinemann, Paul Dillenberger, and, most famously, Don Rawitsch in November of 1971 on a teletypewriter available to them through Carleton College. They were looking for a unique way to teach westward movement during their undergraduate student teaching assignments. It would not have reached its infamous popularity without it being bought and produced by the Minnesota Educational Computing Consortium, or MECC, in the 1980s. From that moment until around the turn of the century, Apple Computer Inc and MECC dominated the computer-savvy education industry: all schools buying Apple IIs, got MECC's arsenal of educational games. It was their joint mission to have computer access and educational games that inspired students to engage more deeply with both technology and traditional school subjects. After discovering a tax deduction for the donation of science equipment for research and education, they were off to the races. By 1989, almost every school district in America had a computer.¹⁶ This concerted effort of getting technology into the hands of every student catapulted *The Oregon Trail* into

¹⁵ Wong, Kevin. "The Forgotten History of 'The Oregon Trail,' As Told By Its Creators." *Vice*. 2017.

¹⁶ Jancer, Matt. "How You Wound Up Playing 'The Oregon Trail' in Computer Class." *Smithsonian Magazine*. 2016.

the hands of millions of young learners across the United States. An argument can be made that this game, coupled with Apple's marketing tactics, was the start of online and computer learning that has defined contemporary education. Nonetheless, the prevalence of *The Oregon Trail* CD-ROM in classrooms throughout the country over the course of five decades cannot be understated.

The basis of the game has remained the same over the many years of updates and spin-offs: every player is a pioneer that starts their 2,000 mile journey via wagon to Willamette Valley, Oregon from Independence, Missouri in the mid-1800s. Throughout the route, they encounter river crossings, thefts, wagon issues, and death in many forms: disease, injury, starvation, and lack of medicine. From its first prototype created by a college student for eighth graders to its first official production through MECC, Don Rawitsch took strides to make the game more historically accurate by reading through the diary entries of these pioneers. Although well intentioned, reading diary entries he was only able to make the Oregon Trail more realistic from the perspective of the travelers and not the Natives. Focused on making it fun, proper representation of all affected parties fell to the wayside in each sequential iteration.

Although much of the information included in *The Oregon Trail* is factual, it's the exclusion of other perspectives—or even just acknowledging the existence of more than one point of view—that makes the game lacking overall. “As much as the game teaches, it mis-teaches more. In fundamental respects, The Oregon Trail is sexist, racist, culturally insensitive, and contemptuous of the earth. It imparts bad values and wrong history.”¹⁷ By concentrating their efforts on creating a game that was engaging rather than socially educational, *The Oregon Trail*, just like the history books, provides

¹⁷ Bigelow, 85.

students with a unidimensional perspective of the historical significance of the Oregon Trail, rather than stressing the importance that the nuanced past has on circumstances of the present.

The Oregon Trail CD-ROM sought to highlight the hardships faced by the pioneers that paved the path westward and fought to establish an American presence on the west coast of what is now the continental United States. The many months of travel, the livelihoods uprooted, the lives lost, and the trials faced upon arrival in Oregon, were all difficult adversities that the American pioneers faced. On an individual level, these struggles should not be discounted, but rather they should be juxtaposed in context with the destruction of Indigenous culture and land, the decimation of the buffalo population forcing many tribes to adjust their hunting patterns, and the deterioration of the relations between American pioneers and Native Americans. It is only when this situation is understood from all sides that learners of every level can decipher what is true, what strives to include all sides of a story. By seeking out this objectivity, we can better understand not only the past, but today as well.

Native Americans were present in the game, but they took form as tokens of how American history has previously portrayed them: another nuance of this foreign environment that must be learned in order to overcome it. “The Oregon Trail programmers are careful not to portray Indians as the ‘enemy’ of westward trekkers. However, the simulation’s superficial sympathy for Native groups masks a profound insensitivity to Indian cultures and to the earth that sustained these cultures.”¹⁸ The implication is that if the player simply disregards the Native Americans, or doesn’t bother them, they can continue their trek west without hurting them. By doing this, the

¹⁸ Bigelow, 87.

player may not be directly harming these tribes, but they are key in establishing an American society that values their society's advancement over the prosperity of those who have long inhabited these lands. The game "perpetuates a racist narrative that privileges the ethos of white settlement through its refusal to engage directly with the genocidal consequences of westward expansion."¹⁹

Another example of overlooking a key group in the history of the Oregon Trail is the lack of Black characters and perspectives. Although in later iterations of the game there are Black characters with which one's player interacts, there is no acknowledgment of the further struggles that Black travelers faced. The term 'slavery,' for example, is particularly missing from *The Oregon Trail* CD-ROM, leading students to forget that this falls within the timeline where slavery was still fully legal. Blacks who traveled the Oregon Trail were up against even more challenges than their white counterparts. Most notably, upon their arrival to Oregon, there were laws enacted to bar them from residency, law that remained in effect until 1926. The preamble of one black exclusion bill explained that "situated as the people of Oregon are, in the midst of an Indian population, it would be highly dangerous to allow free negroes and mulattoes to reside in the territory or to intermix with the Indians, instilling in their minds feelings of hostility against the white race."²⁰ This is a particularly jarring assessment as it clearly addresses the fact that the white men who were writing these laws understood both Native Americans and African Americans could and would have negative sentiments towards them. They believed that the relationships that would form between

¹⁹ Slater, Katherine. "Who Gets to Die of Dysentery?: Ideology, Geography, and 'The Oregon Trail.'" *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*. vol. 24, no. 4. 2017, 381.

²⁰ Bigelow, 87.

these two oppressed peoples would lead to wars. It is intersectional representation, the fact that Native peoples and Blacks have relations outside of that with the white Americans, that is missing from *The Oregon Trail* CD-ROM. This is just another example where *The Oregon Trail* CD-ROM lacked the nuances of cultural dynamics and instead shows history solely from the perspective of the white pioneers.

Although deficient in including all the voices and viewpoints that were effected by the Oregon Trail, the game was successful in what it set out to do: get young learners excited about class materials by engaging them through an interactive medium. We must remember that “CD-ROMs are programmed by people—people with particular cultural biases—and children who play the new computer games encounter the biases of the programmers.”²¹ It is therefore not the information in the game that is explicitly problematic, but rather the lack of acknowledgement that the game provides the history and struggles of the Oregon Trail from only one perspective: a white, land-owning, male. One philosopher even goes so far as to say, “a critical computer literacy, one with a social and ecological conscience, is more than just a good idea—it’s a basic skill.” This is especially vital in light of the advent of “new flashy computer packages [that] also invoke terms long sacred to educators: student empowerment, individual choice, creativity, and high interest.”²² Rather than write off *The Oregon Trail* game for being problematic, we should instead simply view it in conjunction with this critical lens, knowing that it lacks inclusion of minority perspectives.

Over the years since the original computer game was released, riding on the

²¹ Bowers, Chet A. “The Cultural Dimensions of Educational Computing: Understanding the Non-Neutrality of Technology.” *Teachers College Press*. 1998.

²² Bigelow, 92.

curtains of *The Oregon Trail's* success, many more variations have been created from CD-ROMs, video games, board and card games, apps, and even nostalgia-driven t-shirts with the famous catch phrase "You have died of dysentery." With each new version of *The Oregon Trail* CD-ROM game, there's an obvious attempt to be more thorough, more accurate, and more complete. Although the game underwent significant changes from its initial debut, the importance of Native people throughout this story remains grossly underplayed. In the latest, 2002, version of the game, information is available about pertinent tribes, but acquisition of this knowledge is not only optional, but also learning about Native Americans falls under the same tabs as information about animals or landscape.²³ This highlights the divide of Otherness created between the white travelers and the Native peoples. Otherness, in this case, can be defined by how "the simulation's structure coerces children into identifying with white settlers and dismissing non-white [persons as] others."²⁴ Young learners can only obtain information about these communities in optional tabs associated with other groups and items that are traditionally categorized as inferior to humankind, such as animals and nature. Even if presented as a cultural exchange, Native people are not presented as equals but rather a means to exploit in order to continue one's journey. On top of this, additional information included in the periphery of the game is not necessary to win the game, further highlighting the insignificance of Native American presence in the game.

Zinn writes, that the argument presented in his book by valuing the perspective of minority groups "cannot be against selection, simplification, emphasis, which are inevitable for both cartographers and historians. But the mapmaker's distortion is a

²³ Slater, 382.

²⁴ Bigelow, 88.

technical necessity for a common purpose shared by all people who need maps.” This is an assertion with which I agree. It’s impossible to include every detail in history and narrowing the scope is necessary, despite it creating an inherent politicization of bias. It is therefore not the exclusion of information, but rather the implications of that exclusion. Zinn goes on to say, “the historian’s distortion is more than technical, it is ideological; it is released into a world of contending interests, where any chosen emphasis supports (whether the historian means to or not) some kind of interest, whether economic or political or racial or national or sexual²⁵.”

There is an unavoidable quality of history in which political motivations and biases are deeply ingrained. *The Oregon Trail* CD-ROM is one example that just scratches the surface of this problem that is becoming increasingly more pertinent and should be discussed more widely. This educational computer game further engrains this ideology that both America and its citizens have this divine right to do as they please in the name of progress. “Manifest destiny may no longer depend on the Homestead Act for legal justification, but its ideologies still permeate out contemporary political discourse through the figure of the white male settler²⁶.” This theory that America is truly better than other nations or societies because of the social and political advancements since its conception has been coined “American exceptionalism.”

Many educators believe this concept of “American exceptionalism” should be valued in the classroom. American exceptionalism can be defined as “the idea of U.S. history as the history of ‘one nation, indivisible.’”²⁷ At surface value, this assessment of

²⁵ Zinn, 8.

²⁶ Slater, 374.

²⁷ Whitson, James Anthony. “Howard Zinn and the Struggle for Real History in the

U.S. history is not explicitly detrimental; the intention is to encourage unity among the American people and solidarity through a shared history. It actually seems quite similar to Zinn's intentions for writing "A People's History of the United States": to argue for the strength of democracy and the powerful potential democratic citizens have to create positive change throughout the course of history. In other words,

Zinn's account is profoundly oriented to the promise of future progress, foreshadowed by past victories... Chapter by chapter, Zinn's book tells stories of hard-won progress in the hard-fought struggles of working people, women, racial and other minorities, and the diverse constituents that make up the people whose history he is striving to tell... His investment in these struggles testifies to his belief that progress is achievable.²⁸

What makes Zinn's argument different from that of American exceptionalism is subtle, but crucial. It is not that progress has occurred, but rather who was the igniting force behind these positive changes through American history. The argument for American exceptionalism believes that these struggles have been overcome together, as a collective "we." Zinn asserts instead that it was the contradiction to the majority's ideology presented by minority groups that was the catalyst for change. The overall public would not have become more progressive, more accepting, and all-around more powerful without this struggle between perspectives.

It's not the fact that America has made mistakes and become stronger and more tolerant as a result, but rather that it is not togetherness and unity that accomplished this; it was dissension in the social, political, racial, and gender-based ranks. It's the forced inclusion and acknowledgement of another perspective that slowly changed the minds of the majority and so too those in positions of power. It has been this struggle and

United States." *International Journal of Social Education*. vol. 24, no. 1. 2012. 91.

²⁸ Whitson, 96.

critique of the status quo that has fundamentally changed America for the better. By presenting only one side of the story, students can't see the rich possibilities for positive change that has occurred by differing points of view. Given this dichotomy between the history presented in the history books and that which we find by digging into perspectives of those who have been oppressed, begs the question: what really happened? Or better yet: what is true history?

What is “True” History?

An argument can be made that history taught to children should emphasize positive outcomes and foster a sense of togetherness that encourages a connection and shared community between students, their present, and their relationship to those of the past. But what good are those lessons if they're not true? Although it can be strongly agreed that these are powerful lessons for children to learn, it is doing them a disservice as it sets them up to believe that the world is at its best through the equitable collaboration of American citizens. We should instead paint a more realistic picture of our socio-political climate in American classrooms so children can mature into thoughtful, informed citizens that are adequately prepared to tackle the intersectional and nuanced problems we face in America.

A perfect example of intentionally curated curriculums that address proper representation is the battle for the Mexican American Studies (MAS) program in the Tucson Unified School District. Because the population of Mexican-Americans in Tucson significantly outnumbers any other demographic, MAS was a program that focused on the ethnic representation in their curriculum. MAS aligned with curriculum standards, but supplemented some content in order to speak directly to the experiences

of Mexican-American students. This was a “color-conscious, not color-blind approach” that showed significant evidence that Mexican-Americans in this program were not only more likely to graduate high school, but also more likely to continue onto college.²⁹ Some educators have believed that teaching should be colorblind: avoiding the explicit acknowledgement of past and current racial differences. This is an attempt to promote unity rather than address historic division. In practice—and as the success of MAS shows—it turns out the opposite is true. By explicitly addressing racial and cultural differences, students engaged more fully with their education. Without this intentionality behind the curriculum or even by simply avoiding racial terminology, marginalized students failed to connect with their teachers and felt isolated from the class material. This provides us with an explicit example of how intentional inclusion has a positive effect on young learners. Rather than exacerbating divisions, representing cultural history empowers students to connect with their past and seek to actively participate in creating a better future. Understanding the truth of the past is necessary if we are to work to improve the present and dream of a better future.

There is so much power in and potential for effective change in curriculum.

Curriculum usually serves as a means for social control. It legitimates existing social relations and the status of those who dominate, and it does so in a way that implies that there are no alternative versions of the world, and that the interpretation being taught in school is, indeed, undisputed fact,³⁰

²⁹ Blankenship, Ann E. and Leslie A. Locke. “Culturally Conscious Curriculum: The Fight Between State and Federal Policies in Tucson.” *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership*. vol. 18, no. 4. 2015, 339.

³⁰ Sleeter, Christine E. and Carl A. Grant. “Race, Class, Gender, and Disability in Current Textbooks.” 2011, 186.

writes one article that analyzed representation of minority groups in the textbooks of a variety of subjects. They found that, not only are “Native Americans seen mainly as historical facts” rather than represented in the present, but there is also a significant lack of representation of inter-racial relations throughout social studies books.³¹ Just like in *The Oregon Trail* CD-ROM, by not explicitly showing that minority groups interact outside of their relationship to white people, history paints a white-centric narrative that wipes out the validity and importance of minority voices. Ultimately they concluded that with textbooks that don’t provide statistically accurate representation, students are presented only one version of reality.

It is through this conflict of ideologies and explicit acknowledgement of controversial issues that students not only get a more complete picture of our society, but they will also be more engaged.³² Only just recently, with the adoption of Common Core standards, has comparing points of view been a requirement in school curriculum. Lessons should be set up to reflect the life students are engaging with outside of the classroom. Concepts like liberty, equality, and power are not only important for learning about the past, but also for understanding the present and shaping conceptions of the future. Rather than shying away from difference to encourage a narrative of togetherness, all levels of the education system in the United States should utilize controversy, politicization, and partisanship as a pedagogical tool.³³ A study that

³¹ Sleeter, 192.

³² Alongi, Marc D., Benjamin C. Heddy, and Gale M. Sinatra. “Real-World Engagement with Controversial Issues in History and Social Studies: Teaching for Transformative Experiences and Conceptual Change.” *Journal of Social Science Education*. Vol. 15, No. 2. 2016, 27.

³³ *Ibid*

evaluated the impact of contentious perspectives as an approach to develop critical thinking found it to be beneficial to address differing perspectives in a classroom setting in order to strengthen students' intellectual habits and comprehensions of history as it relates to the present. This study relied heavily on Dewey's philosophy that valued issues-centered education over "the conventional didactic approach more concerned with the learning of historical or geographic facts."³⁴ Dewey goes on to address the differences between rote memorization of facts and gaining true knowledge on a subject, which we will explore further, later on in this article.

Each of these studies provides concrete examples of the importance of differing ideologies and proper representation in the classroom. Rather than having inclusion be surface level, students need to dive in and engage deeply with complex ideologies and perspectives that have defined America's history in order to have an authentic picture of the present. By interacting with historical information in a critical way, students better understand the nuances of the past and how they have informed the present. Analysis of the information being presented to them, coupled with authentic and informed representation of minority groups teaches students that their choices and actions play an important role in shaping our history.

After overviewing the historical significance of both the Oregon Trail as well as the CD-ROM game that popularized it, it is clear that American history books and the educational games that we have presented the children of this country have been grossly lacking a critical component that teaches these young learners to evaluate the biases of the information they're being presented. The omnipresent need to strive for objectivity by accounting for and seeking out as many perspectives as possible is a vital part of the

³⁴ Alongi, 26.

American ideology of pragmatism. To dive further into the philosophical significance and the socio-political implications of analyzing the way history has been presented in this country, we look to Dewey and pragmatism which values democracy and an informed society through education. This is where the importance of pragmatism as it relates to the possibilities presented by democracy through education comes into play.

Pragmatism

Democracy & Education

Although published a century ago, John Dewey's philosophical assessment of our education system and the role of democracy in academia in *Democracy and Education* still rings true today. Dewey's writings shine a positive light into the possibilities for a better future as he argues how democracy and education can come together to ameliorate society. Throughout his work, he argues the political essence of education and its current implications on class structure. Ultimately he concludes that through intentionally curated, educative efforts influenced by the circumstances and interests of all learners, we can uplift society and highlight our commonalities and shared humanity. Let's dive into his argument and break it down.

The core of Dewey's argument is rooted in his assessment that education should be democratic. He defines democracy as "more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoin communicated experience."³⁵ It is this shared community and sense of camaraderie that encourages a democratic society to rally together and understand each other's experiences in order to make more informed decisions. Dewey defines democratic education as that which encourages understanding between groups. He says, "consensus demands communication."³⁶ It is through this sharing of perspective and experience that each individual can come to better understand the circumstances of others. This is important, because by sharing perspectives and debating ideologies forces us to see the influence and effects of our

³⁵ Dewey, John. "Democracy and Education: and Introduction to the Philosophy of Education." *Free Press*. 1968, 49.

³⁶ Dewey, 8.

thoughts and actions. Dewey writes, “if each views the consequences of his own acts as having a bearing upon what others are doing and takes into account the consequences of their behavior upon himself, then there is a common mind; a common intent in behavior.”³⁷

Common mind, as Dewey phrases it, is an important aspect in understanding our shared humanity. He explains that we should seek for knowledge to be humanistic “not because it is about human products in the past, but because of what it does in liberating human intelligence and human sympathy. Any subject matter which accomplishes this result is humane, and any subject matter which does not accomplish it is not even educational.”³⁸ Socially, the goal of education and democracy should be to address the topics that not only affect every human but also address the humanity in every person. Dewey encourages both learners and teachers to evaluate the social implications behind the structure of education as well as information at large, and how it’s presented.

Education is both a necessity and a social function. In conjunction, education provides us with the grounds to share purpose and commonality with others. Education encourages interpersonal collaboration which strengthens the social bonds between learners through the camaraderie of experiences and perspectives. With shared understanding comes common ends and purpose. Once we can agree about the way of the world, we can look onwards toward the future and ideate on reconstruction of current norms for the benefit of gradual betterment. It is education that allows us to seek the genuine intentions of democracy: authentic representation that creates a society that properly addresses the humanity and needs of all.

³⁷ Dewey, 21.

³⁸ Dewey, 121.

Using Dewey's argument presented in *Democracy and Education* as a guide, we can recalibrate the aims of education in order to reflect this ideal. Good educational aims must account for the characteristics of the individual being educated, the environment needed, and the necessity emphasizing the individual in order to uniquely address the lenses and biases of each learner. The overall goal of democratic education is to continuously reevaluate social circumstances in order to be better informed and more inclusive. Dewey writes,

a good aim [of education] surveys the present state of experience of pupils, and forming a tentative plan of treatment, keeps the plan constantly in view and yet modifies it as conditions develop. The aim, in short, is experimental, and hence constantly growing as it is tested in action.³⁹

Education requires authentic engagement with material and active interaction that brings about a relationship between the learner and the knowledge learned. This pragmatist process of learning, where a student is connected to what is being taught, encourages those to critically evaluate information rather than taking it at face value.

Commonly, education is structured to encourage students to find the answer that the teacher is looking for or the response that will suffice; students are taught to answer that which will allow them to pass rather than to genuinely interact with and understand the information presented to them. This mentality encourages students to treat new learnings in all aspects of their life the same way: looking for the bare minimum answer rather than diving deep. Dewey writes, "for when the schools depart from the educational conditions effective in the out-of-school environment, they necessarily substitute a bookish, pseudo-intellectual spirit for a social spirit."⁴⁰ Democratic

³⁹ Dewey, 58.

⁴⁰ Dewey, 26.

education implores students to dive into the nuances of knowledge rather than accept information at face value. By doing so, students gain a robust understanding of information that allows them to more authentically engage with the material, questioning and arguing for or against differing perspectives.

Education must parallel the learnings and situations that students deal with in their everyday lives if education is to play an active role in their lives. “A curriculum which acknowledges the social responsibilities of education must present situations where problems are relevant to the problems of living together, and where observation and information are calculated to develop social insight and interest.”⁴¹ Establishing this type of environment must depend on intentional structure by the schools themselves. They must “see to it that each individual gets an opportunity to escape from the limitations of the social group in which he was born, and to come into living contact with a broader environment.”⁴² Education should allow students to overcome their circumstances and therefore have the chance to be a better citizen.

But no matter how revolutionary and inventive an educational system or intentional a curriculum may be, these efforts fall on deaf ears unless each student is individually engaged with the material and has reason to care about it. Dewey repeatedly highlights the importance of an individual’s interest in a topic in order for them to genuinely engage with the material and for that information to gain real-life applicability and relevance to their life.

Each individual has unique qualities and interests that should be nourished in order to educate the whole person. He writes, “it is the business of education to discover

⁴¹ Dewey, 103.

⁴² Dewey, 50.

these aptitudes and progressively train them for social use.”⁴³ Democratic education celebrates the differences in students rather than sets a precedent that each one should achieve the same levels of comprehension and interest in each area of study. By engaging the unique qualities of the individual, “the whole pupil is engaged, the artificial gap between life in school and out is reduced, motives are afforded for attention to a large variety of materials and processes distinctly educative in effect.”⁴⁴ An education that focuses on the student rather than material is one that makes room for genuine understanding and interaction with information in a way that deeply influences the student as she grapples with the context and arguments surrounding any given topic. Dewey highlights the importance of diversity and balance of intellectual stimulation, because it means novelty, and novelty means challenge of thought.⁴⁵ In both the classroom and society at large, this discourse is needed in order to strengthen each individual’s understanding and the influence of their lens on their knowledge.

This parallels the expectations of a democratic society: one where each person has interests and experiences that influence their perspectives and knowledge, one where these differences between individuals encourages communication and fosters an understanding and acceptance of those who are different than them in small or big ways. Education that builds up the comprehension of the individual and encourages engagement across perspectives creates a culture that values discourse over anger and debate over disregard. “A democratic society must... allow for intellectual freedom and

⁴³ Dewey, 50.

⁴⁴ Dewey, 104.

⁴⁵ Dewey, 48.

the play of diverse gifts and interests in its educational measures.”⁴⁶

The relationship between education and society is inter-dependent in some ways too. “[A] school cannot immediately escape from the ideals set by prior social conditions,” but by not explicitly addressing them, that means “education accepts the present social conditions as final, and thereby takes upon itself the responsibility for perpetuating them.”⁴⁷ Therefore, it is the goal of education to critique the current values within society and actively seek to address those issues in the classroom. By not explicitly addressing the present circumstances in a critical way, it is not only implicitly accepting the current situation but it also perpetuates that social structure. Dewey says explicitly, “it is the aim of progressive education to take part in correcting unfair privilege and unfair deprivation, not to perpetuate them.”⁴⁸ How amazing would it be if education focused on elevating students and society rather than historical facts and figures that won’t serve them in their real life?

The three-part relationship between understanding the influence of the past, comprehending the circumstances of the present, and foreseeing the implications of the future is tumultuous. Democratic education requires intentional effort to analyze perspectives, put differing ideologies into contention, and constantly reevaluate one’s own understanding of a situation. Although curriculums can be set up to foster this critical sense of analysis, it falls on the individual to continue to treat new information this way throughout her life. Dewey emphasized the importance of open-mindedness and responsibility within an individual. Open-mindedness he defines as an active

⁴⁶ Dewey, 159.

⁴⁷ Dewey, 74.

⁴⁸ Dewey, 66.

willingness to learn new things and modify previous conceptions. Responsibility is defined as taking facts with a grain of salt and coming to conclusions with proper evidence.⁴⁹ It is the conjunction of these characteristics that define pragmatism, because pragmatist ideology believes knowledge to be the critical analysis of new information as it interacts with one's own past understanding. It requires an individual to be both open-minded and responsible—per Dewey's definitions—in order to be truly educated democratically. Explicitly addressing how his philosophy relates to pragmatism. Knowledge requires us to adapt our understanding to the world around us in order to make sense of circumstances. It is through our efforts to understand our environment that we use pragmatist ideology.

As previously stated, educative efforts must address authentic situations students would find themselves in, engage each learner individually, address the connection to the past and implications of the future. Dewey says, “past events cannot be separated from the living present and retain meaning. The true starting point of history is always some present situation with its problems.”⁵⁰ He highlights the importance of critically evaluating the past in order to understand the circumstances that have brought about the present. This is a key point in the importance of education, because it shows the format for providing context on the current social climate. Without understanding the past, we cannot parse through the nuances of a situation in the present. If we seek to ameliorate the future, we must be able to accurately articulate current problems in order to lay the groundwork for improving the circumstances.

Pragmatism, like educative efforts, requires constant inspection, criticism, and

⁴⁹ Dewey, 94-96.

⁵⁰ Dewey, 114.

revision with pure objectivity—although unattainable—as the ultimate goal. With pragmatism being the ideal of democratic education, progressive communities “endeavor to shape the experiences of the young so that instead of reproducing current habits, better habits shall be formed, and thus the future adult society be an improvement on their own.”⁵¹ By striving to be better informed through seeking out different perspectives and critically analyzing information as it is presented, education can work to ameliorate society as a whole through the resurgence of genuine democratic ideals.

Ultimately, the conclusion that Dewey asserts in *Democracy and Education* is that both social and moral fulfillment should—and can—be the goals of education. At the end of his book, he discusses the role of morality in education. He writes,

all education which develops power to share effectively in social life is moral. It forms a character which not only does the particular deed socially necessary but one which is interested in that continuous readjustment which is essential to growth. Interest in learning from all the contacts of life is the essential moral interest.⁵²

Learning that emphasizes discussion and interaction between different social perspectives not only embodies pragmatism, but also encourages democratic discourse throughout society. It is these characteristics that should be valued in our education system in order to up lift our society as a whole. We can continue to improve our individual understanding the same way democratic culture can be elevated: from the ground up, by inviting differing perspectives into conversations in order to challenge our preconceived notions and preexisting biases.

Dewey understands that this is a lengthy, arduous process. “Men still want the

⁵¹ Dewey, 45.

⁵² Dewey, 186.

crutch of dogma, of beliefs fixed by authority, to relieve them of the trouble of thinking and the responsibility of directing their activity by thought.”⁵³ It is significantly more comfortable to remain resolute in previous beliefs, but pragmatism challenges us to question our theories and ideologies and see how they withstand that pressure. Democracy can only work and benefit society if we actively engage with it and all others.

Current Education Applicability

Because Dewey wrote *Democracy and Education* so long ago, it is only natural that we must address the ways in which the world has changed as it relates to his argument. Dewey argued that faith in democracy is equal to faith in experience and education, but this form of democracy that he speaks of requires participation. Given that society changes over time, it is only natural that his argument might take a different form now than it would have one hundred years ago. There have been three distinct changes in American society that should be acknowledged in order to accept this ideology to the present: globalism, environmentalism and the increased prevalence of technology.⁵⁴

Globalism refers to policies that moved away from principles of participatory and social democracy to emphasize the individual over the greater good of society.⁵⁵ This is relevant because politics have become focused on single issues rather than addressing

⁵³ Dewey, 176.

⁵⁴ Peters, Michael A, and Petar Jandrić. “Dewey’s ‘Democracy and Education’ in the age

of digital reason: the global, the ecological, and digital turns.” *Open Review of Educational Research*. vol. 4, no. 1. 2017, 208.

⁵⁵ Peters, 209.

the overall public. This could also be due to “the notion of citizenship [having] grown beyond the nation state to embrace various new nations such as global, world, cosmopolitan, multicultural, ecological, digital, and many other forms of citizenship.”⁵⁶ Environmentalism “brings together two powerful concepts and international movements of ecology and local democracy that are needed to bring about transformation of grassroots civil society.” This brings about conceptions of ecological democracy which brings the “freedom to participate in local society and our growing awareness of the interconnectedness of all living things”⁵⁷ in conversation. The last, are arguably most prevalent, is the vital connection that has been established between humankind and technology. It has significantly changed the “ways we see the world and make [both individual and collective] decisions.”⁵⁸ This third aspect is particularly interesting because it calls into question the notion of collective intelligence. Technology allows us all to have the same access to information and access therefore leading us to falsely believe in equitable representation of perspectives, inputs, and needs.

Despite the societal changes over the past century, this referenced article concludes that

Dewey’s understanding of democracy as [collective] intelligence,... links between democracy and education, belief in collective human capacity for improving own circumstances, and insisting on importance of experience, remain central pillars of our contemporary understanding of democracy.⁵⁹

These three turns—which separate democracy of Dewey’s times and democracy of

⁵⁶ Peters, 210.

⁵⁷ Peters, 211.

⁵⁸ Peters, 212.

⁵⁹ Peters, 215.

today—highlight the important changes that have occurred and influenced our present society. Our conceptions of citizenship, access to information, and necessity of taking other communities into account have changed in such fundamental ways since his time and must therefore be acknowledged when applying this philosophy to contemporary circumstances. Although there have been significant changes in how we interact with our peers, this does not detract from Dewey’s argument. Just as when it was written, if we are to fight for and believe in the power of successful democracy, we need to strive to include all perspectives, critically analyze our own biases, and reevaluate theories that have become deeply ingrained.

A large source of inspiration for this topic arose from the increasing division in politics that has trickled into every crevice of social life. It is my argument that teaching and encouraging critical thinking is the strongest force to counteract our distrust of media and public information. In his study “You All Made Dank Memes: Using Internet Memes to Promote Critical Thinking,” Dominic Wells overviews the pervasiveness of social media phenomena on better understanding our socio-political climate.⁶⁰ He argues that students can establish a strong comprehension of current politics through the use of comedic visuals, or memes, which have become a new form of communication on social media platforms. Critical thinking in regards to Internet content is becoming increasingly more important in the American political climate where information is becoming increasingly less trustworthy. By creating their own political memes and other forms of innovative assignments such as these, students engage in active learning that helps foster critical thinking skills.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Wells, Dominic D., “You All Made Dank Memes: Using Internet Memes to Promote Critical Thinking.” *Journal of Political Science Education*. vol. 14, no. 2. 2018.

⁶¹ Wells, 240.

Wells encourages students to engage with this material not only through a digital medium such as social media, but also socially whereby students can discuss each of their assignments and assess them respectively. “Debating the merits of each meme would allow students to reflect on their use of evidence and help them recognize the strengths and weaknesses of arguments.”⁶² Learning in this format relates back to Dewey’s argument in that it highlights the importance of social interaction in education. Critical thinking arises from the interaction of one’s perspective with another and evaluating the quality and relevance of each argument.

It is within these social interactions where true learning and growth begins. One’s experience, perspectives, and personal theories provide the starting point for learning. One must continuously take into account differing opinions or new information to reevaluate one’s own understanding and biases. “Dewey argued that the fear of difference and uncertainty is one of the main obstacles to using intelligence to improve, that is, ameliorate, individual and social circumstances.”⁶³ It is social interaction and education that values manifold perspectives that diminishes this fear. Progress is never permanent, but it is the striving for it that defines pragmatism. Pragmatism as a field emphasizes the importance of improving one’s own understanding of a given topic through interacting with others to better understand their experiences and circumstances. It doesn’t stop with relevance to our current political climate. It is as vitally important in regards to social and racial norms too.

⁶² Wells, 245.

⁶³ McKenna, Erin and Scott L. Pratt. “American Philosophy From Wounded Knee to Present.” *Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.* 2015, 93.

Conclusion

The evidence of inhumane treatment from Christopher Columbus' arrival to the present is vast. Despite the existence of this expansive historical knowledge, the social and cultural understanding of this past is lacking in the common knowledge of the American public. To better understand the true history behind the relations between Native Americans and the European settlers, we must critically analyze the narrative that has been previously presented to us throughout the American school system. It is only through the comparison of these history books to the perspectives of those being oppressed that we can acknowledge that this story has been wrongfully passed on to the young learners in this country. A history that, as previously discussed, was critiqued by Howard Zinn.

A story of manifest destiny, of natural dominance, of justified domination, of a quiet and natural extinction. The eradication of Native peoples is glazed over in US history books, taken to be a necessary consequence of the expansion of Westernism. It is my argument that the present cannot be fully valued and understood without the complete understanding of the past. We all know that every story—all of history—is comprised of manifold perspectives, wrongdoings, rationales, and intentions, but it is through the amalgamation of these that we can come to see these in their entirety. Although true objectivity can never be reached, it is through the acknowledgement of this inability that we can continue to strive for this goal. Through understanding our own hermeneutical lenses in juxtaposition with the contrary view points of others, we arrive to a place of understanding that allows us to question; to question our perspectives that hold us back from truly empathizing and comprehending the situations

of others, to question the biases of the previous story tellers, to question the socio-political goals of historians, to question what knowledge can exist between the lines, to question what details and voices are missing.

This is where pragmatism comes into play. With a pragmatist lens, we can encourage all learners—historians of all levels—to properly evaluate the information that has previously been written. Historically, philosophy has acted as a field dominated by monisms; philosophers have consistently produced theories that have asserted there is one way—or better yet, only one right way—to exist or think. Pragmatism presents a critique to that monist ideology. Pragmatism encourages a constant realignment of one's perspective by continuously inviting new information and perspectives into one's repertoire.

Critiquing American education can and should be evaluated through a pragmatist lens as it encourages further discovery of differing ideologies and experiences. Given our previous overview of *The Oregon Trail* CD-ROM, it's clear that the creators of that game should have consulted and included more perspectives and information about Native American populations. Without the proper representation of all parties, not only does the game lack social relevance but it also fails to properly teach students the actual history.

There is no debate that *The Oregon Trail* CD-ROM has presented both parents and teachers with an easy means to get young learners excited about learning history. That was the entire purpose of this game: to provide students with an interactive and engaging means to understand the historical importance of and to empathize with the hardships endured on The Oregon Trail. Although the game had noble intentions,

history cannot be accurately reenacted without a solid and accurate foundation in the experiences of each and every party. Unfortunately, there are many areas this game-play depiction of history falls short; namely misrepresentation of anyone who is not a white male. Although efforts are being made by educators to mitigate the falsification of history taught to my generation, as well as those to come, the detrimental impact of a depiction of history that lacks intentional, accurate representation are still present.

After covering the history of the Oregon Trail, the relevance of the CD-ROM, Dewey's pragmatism and how it relates to current education standards, we can see clearly the need for proper representation in American history classes. Presenting history with perspectives from both the majority and the minority fills in the details and provides a fuller depiction of the events of the past. By understanding the true delineation of history, we can better understand the context behind the circumstances of the present. It is my contention that the democratic ideals of pragmatism encourage a discussion of the opposition presented in historical accounts traditionally included in American textbooks and that which accounts for the situations of minority groups. Rather than deepening the chasms that has been established and politicized in American culture, they will alleviate those divisions because they encourage both a listening to and understanding of perspectives.

Rather than being celebrated and honored for their rich cultural history, Native Americans are largely believed to be a relic of the past or anthropomorphized into the concept of casinos and authentic tobacco production. The numerical and cultural significance of their population is not emphasized in American education, and when it is discussed, Native Americans are referred to in the past tense. It is largely unknown

among the American public that there are still five million Native Americans living in the U.S. That is the same number of Jewish people in this country. And that doesn't even acknowledge the millions of Native peoples that existed on what is now American soil when their tribes thrived prior to European immigration.

The lack of authentic representation of Native Americans in *The Oregon Trail* CD-ROM is just one example of many in our education system that paints an inaccurate picture of the past and therefore highlights the unjustified opinions of present circumstances. These lessons that we learn from pragmatism and through critiquing the US education system—as lacking intentionality and inclusion—are even more vital in light of current events. As I write this, the protests in Minnesota rage as Black Lives Matter advocates and their allies fight for justice for the life of George Floyd, along with the lives of so many other innocent Black Americans before him, as well as the livelihood of Black Americans in general. If nothing else, my sincere hope is for our education system to value and encourage critical analysis of historical perspectives in order to better understand our shared history. Acknowledging that America has changed social norms and overcome injustices over the years is no longer good enough. American children need to understand that it takes the juxtaposition of perspectives to create change; this contention of ideologies highlights differences in order to find shared commonalities. If we want to teach American children about the importance of democracy and the strength of togetherness, we must do so by acknowledging our shared humanity. With this as a starting point, pragmatism can be the guiding philosophy that encourages constant reevaluation of our perspectives and values in order to be more accepting, more informed, more inclusive.

Despite America's divisiveness politically, we can still rally around the ideals of democracy. As Dewey believed those many years ago, if we put trust in the education and inclusion of all, we can create a society that reflects those ideals. Pragmatism allows us to accept our perspectives as flawed as we pursue a never-ending attempt towards objective justice. So let's keep fighting for that democratic ideal.

Bibliography

- Alongi, Marc D., Benjamin C. Heddy, and Gale M. Sinatra. "Real-World Engagement with Controversial Issues in History and Social Studies: Teaching for Transformative Experiences and Conceptual Change." *Journal of Social Science Education*. vol. 15, no. 2. 2016.
- Bigelow, Bill. "On the Road to Cultural Bias: Critique of The Oregon Trail CD-ROM." *National Council of Teachers of English*. vol. 74, no. 2. 1997.
- Blankenship, Ann E. and Leslie Ann Locke. "Culturally Conscious Curriculum: The Fight Between State and Federal Policies in Tucson." *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership*. vol. 18, no. 4. 2015.
- Bowers, Chet A. "The Cultural Dimensions of Educational Computing: Understanding the Non-Neutrality of Technology." *Teachers College Press*. 1998.
- Dewey, John. "Democracy and Education: and Introduction to the Philosophy of Education." *Free Press*. 1968.
- Ellis, Elisabeth G. and Anthony Elser. "World History." *Pearson Education, Inc.* 2009, 482-483.
- Jancer, Matt. "How You Wound Up Playing 'The Oregon Trail' in Computer Class." *Smithsonian Magazine*. 2016.
- McKenna, Erin and Scott L. Pratt. "American Philosophy From Wounded Knee to Present." *Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.* 2015.
- Mumper, Lucile S. "The Oregon Trail." *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society*. vol. 28, no. 1. 1950.
- , "Oregon Trail." *History.com*. 2019.
- Peters, Michael A. and Peter Jandrić. "Dewey's 'Democracy and Education' in the age of digital reason: the global, the ecological, and digital turns." *Open Review of Educational Research*. vol. 4, no. 1. 2017.
- Slater, Katherine. "Who Gets to Die of Dysentery?: Ideology, Geography, and 'The Oregon Trail.'" *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*. vol. 24, no. 4. 2017.
- Sleeter, Christine E and Carl A. Grant. "Race, Class, Gender, and Disability in Current Textbooks." 2017.

Wells, Dominic D., "You All Made Dank Memes: Using Internet Memes to Promote Critical Thinking." *Journal of Political Science Education*. vol. 14, no. 2. 2018.

Whitson, James Anthony. "Howard Zinn and the Struggle for Real History in the United States." *International Journal of Social Education*. vol. 24, no. 1. 2012.

Wong, Kevin. "The Forgotten History of 'The Oregon Trail,' As Told By Its Creators." *Vice*. 2017.

Zinn, Howard. "A People's History of the United States." *Harper Collins*. 2003, 2-148.